Digital Keepers: The Ethics of Saving Online Data about Latin American Social Movements

By Itza A. Carbajal

On March 26, 2015, Soad Nicole Ham Bustillos, age 13, and three other young Hondurans, all high school students, were murdered in Tegucigalpa. Less than 24 hours earlier, video footage had shown them publicly protesting against recent cuts and changes imposed by the Ministry of Education. The video footage displayed faces of minors, included names or ID tags, a school uniform, a location, and possible relationships. This video also captured in real time the anger and frustrations Honduran students faced and served as evidence of a vexed populace. The video made the rounds on social networks shortly after Soad's student group had gathered to protest. She never made it home that day, and her body was found strangled and beaten.

As researchers continue their exploration on the use of digital data in their intellectual pursuits, there exists a crucial need for caution. Similarly, groups and individuals who work on social justice issues in Latin America have also increased their use of information-sharing online to spread the word of their plight and implore others to join their cause. How often do researchers consider their role and responsibility in using and preserving online born digital data documenting activism in Latin America? If they do practice preservation strategies, how do they navigate issues of privacy and safety, while also subverting the possibility of providing intel for surveilling institutions? This article highlights some ethical dilemmas researchers face with regard to digital data, in hopes that researchers will further develop their digital sensibilities.

This research analyzes different aspects of the information lifecycle as it relates to the processes researchers encounter when handling digital data and engaging in digital scholarship. Utilizing an expanded model of the Information Lifecycle, three areas will be highlighted, including the Describe, Review, and Deposit/Archive phases. These suggested stages highlight just a few approaches to cultivating a vigilant and less damaging digital scholarship framework that both consider the needs of academic inquiry and the safety of the people captured through the data.

INFORMATION LIFECYCLE

When using online digital data, researchers must develop a better understanding of how information typically comes into existence. The Information Lifecycle Model (Figure 1) has historically been used to convey the different stages data typically undergoes. In my research, that model has been expanded to include the additional areas of Describe, Review, and Release (Figure 2). This expanded model avoids a strictly linear and chronological structure and instead focuses on a multilayered, non-sequential, and nonlinear approach.
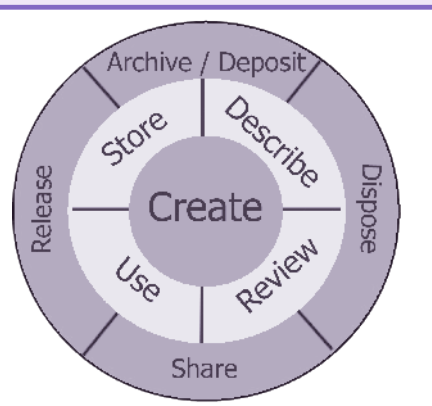

Figure 1: Information Lifecycle   Figure 2 Expanded Information Lifecycle Model

Digital images by Itza A. Carbajal, 2016

The multilayered design serves as an example of how information goes through different layers of existing that often occur simultaneously and, depending on the user or creator of the data, can be acted on or ignored. In addition, the non-sequential aspect facilitates an understanding that information can remain in a static state, can be handed over to another caretaker, or it can cease to exist.

For researchers, the expanded model more closely aligns with their tendencies when handling digital data. Researchers typically start by either creating digital data, or harvesting data created by members of a social movement. If the researcher creates the data or harvests raw data, they typically store the data afterward. Given today's unstable political climate around the world, including Latin American countries, the availability of collected data can jeopardize the safety of individuals the data includes. Social media, an exclusively online and public platform, has recently become the topic of cyber safety discussions as more state surveillance agencies such as the National Security Agency (NSA) and local police departments turn to these public platforms in an effort criminalize and persecute organizers.

DIGITAL ACTIVISM RISKS AND DIGITAL FREEDOMS

Given the fluid and intangible nature of digital media, researchers can easily forget the very real dangers participants may face when engaging in digital activism. Researchers, especially those not residing at the site of conflict, often communicate and engage with the work on the ground using information communication technologies (ICTs) such as cell phones, mobile devices,

or the internet. Activist groups, in turn, share information with researchers and other members of the public through websites, blogs, and social networks. Some argue that these new possibilities have broken down barriers "created by money, time, space, and distance [with information] disseminated cheaply to many people at once." Despite these new possibilities, one must avoid romanticizing ICTs, as many people around the world continue to struggle to connect and there are numerous pitfalls of overindulging in digital engagement. One of the most fascinating and terrifying aspects of the relationship between social networks and personal information goes back to the fact that much of it is crowdsourced from the original creator and their immediate peers. Take face recognition, for example. Facebook has been said to have a 95 percent accuracy rate compared to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's 85 percent. Many factors contribute to the facial recognition algorithm's success, but much can be said about an individual's own contribution to the wealth of the personal information database. Researchers also play a crucial role in providing valuable information; for that reason, their responsibility toward activist and organizing groups is significant.

Depending on the country, activists and organizers may face dangers ranging from online harassment to death threats to actual persecution by either state officials or violent oppositional groups. When contemplating the level of caution needed, one crucial step is to review the degree of digital freedom the particular country in question provides its population. Digital freedom refers to the levels of freedom countries grant their people. Depending on the defined areas of measurements, digital freedoms can include extent of internet infrastructure, amount of financial barriers to access, limits on what content can be displayed, as well as extent of user rights, from privacy to protections from repercussions for online activity and content. Several global reports exist that measured the extent of digital freedoms around the world, with many reporting negative trajectories as more governing bodies view online interactions as possible threats to their dominance. This article focuses exclusively on highlighting the relationship between user rights while online and the ethical responsibilities of researchers when interacting and using digital data.

ETHICS OF DESCRIPTION

A recent trend in digital activism in the United States can function as commentary on the realities of other countries. In the wake of the election of Donald Trump, and the mighty opposition it has stirred in the United States, a particular graphic continues to spread in social network threads. During the inauguration protests, the phrase, "The riot is one night . . . but metadata lasts forever," set in a digital graphic design, spread like wildfire as the news of anti-Trump demonstrations circulated on people's de-

THE RIOT IS ONE NIGHT...

COVER YOUR FACE AND HAIR · THINK BEFORE YOU TEXT · ENCRYPT YOUR SHIT · WEAR GLOVES · DON'T USE FACEBOOK, PERIOD · WATCH OUT FOR GOOGLE TOO · USE PUBLIC COMPUTERS OR ENCRYPTED NETWORKS · DON'T SPECULATE ABOUT WHO DID WHAT · WATCH OUT FOR RFID TAGS · DON'T PUT YOUR PICTURE ONLINE · DON'T BRAG · LEAVE YOUR PHONE AT HOME · REMEMBER THAT THE NSA READS YOUR EMAIL · BE CAREFUL, NOT PARANOID · NEVER SNITCH, EVER

...BUT METADATA LASTS FOREVER.

YourAnonGlobal on Twitter, January 20, 2017. Accessed February 26, 2017.

vices. As more and new people join efforts to dismantle the many oppressive systems in the United States and to actively combat against the destructive policies of the current U.S. administration, there seems to be a strong tendency to train new folks in ways that provide for their safety and security. Despite precautions, even if organizers and activists take necessary steps at one moment, this does not guarantee that personal information has not attached itself to their online presence ubiquitously. At many protests, digital data are now regularly captured using drones, video footage such as that captured by body cameras, and protesters' own mobile devices. When harvesting or accessing this sort of data, researchers must practice caution, especially if they plan to store digital data sets for future use or to deposit their data at a university, research center, or other storage facility.

ETHIC OF REVIEW

When researchers deal with digital data, the data review phase often comes as they contemplate depositing their research data in an archive or perhaps publishing that data in print or digital form. Yet the review phase is frequently overlooked as it can appear as though all cautionary practices come at the beginning of a research endeavor. This assumption can be misleading, especially considering the very shareable nature of digital data. Even if a researcher makes all the correct decisions when selecting data to include or highlight in publications and presentations, this does not guarantee that others will follow suit with that same data. Depositing raw datasets is, thus, risky. Luckily, groups such as Documenting the Now, Witness, and others that work with Indigenous communities are actively developing standards and practices that emphasize notions of consent and safety regarding creators and their digital footprints. This becomes extremely important as state surveillance tactics increasingly utilize and invest in digital surveillance technologies. As digital information becomes more ubiquitous in scholarship, researchers will face an even greater responsibility to review all content before handing it over to another entity.

ETHICS OF DEPOSIT/ARCHIVING

For archivists, the relationship to researchers and their data is one of the most enduring and fruitful. Despite this long-standing relationship, levels of communication and understanding between archivists and researchers continue to fluctuate. When dealing with digital datasets, archivists find themselves in predicaments related to sharing and providing access online. As the chain of custody becomes blurry, even archivists who wish to protect creators' personal information face obstacles ranging from having to locate subjects and obtain consent, to deciding what information to provide in online digital archival portals. Given that much of

My Neighborhood is NOT for Sale!

Mi Barrio No Se Vende is a collation of vecinos and organizations based in the Westside of San Antonio. Our goal is simple: Stop the further displacement of our gente. We want to be able to stay and grow in our barrios, alongside our friends and family.

This gentrification of the Westside is cultural genocide. It is the erasure of our communities that have lived here for generations. It is the erasure of our culture, which has been a means of survival for decades. It is the erasure of our arte, our música, our literatura and our stories. As we lose our neighborhood, we lose ourselves.

MI BARRIO NO SE VENDE

San Anto se defiende

esperanzacenter.org/mibarrio

What is your favorite thing about El Westside?

Is it the neighbors? The folks you have shared many *domingos* with, accompanied by *carne asada y una cerveza*. Is it the *música*? The rhythm of the *accordion y bajo sexto* that makes dancing a polka a reminder of home. Is it the art that covers the walls of our *casitas*? Or our stories that tell our history painted on walls throughout the barrio that has watched us grow. Is it the sense of community—with the promise that it will always be?

The Westside is nothing without us. As San Antonio grows, it must grow for us. We are in the midst of a nationwide housing crisis that significantly impacts San Antonio. Housing has become inaccessible to most of our working class community, pushing many out of city limits or to live on the streets. We must question the policies and actions that perpetuate this crisis, affecting us the most. We strive to work in community to create a strong, supportive, and proactive strategy to halt the gentrification of the Westside. As downtown expands into our barrio, we must protect our neighborhood from becoming unaffordable and inaccessible to our community, our gente.

The coalition meets through a series of *cafecitos* where neighbors talk about the housing issues that are affecting their day to day lives. These *cafecitos* can take place anywhere that folks are able to meet. They can be at *Rinconcito de Esperanza*, your Tía's sala, or your own front porch! *Cafecitos* are facilitated by other vecinos, identifying some of the issues and solutions to these concerns. In this way, with *pláticas* and gatherings, together we can propose solutions to the threat gentrification and the housing crisis pose for our neighborhoods. Call the Esperanza, 210.228.0201 for information.

!Mi barrio no se vende! —Yaneth Flores

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the information on who, what, when, where, and why stems from the researchers' work, researchers are best suited to reviewing and identifying possible concerns. They can also help by filtering sensitive information prior to depositing data into an archival facility during any of the steps of the information lifecycle.

APPROACH WITH CARE

Many of the issues discussed in this essay stem from a U.S. perspective, given the author's location and familiarity. Given this limitation, the topics discussed serve as a cautionary tale about long-established colonial practices embedded in institutions in the United States and many other countries. Researchers should approach digital data with the same care as they do when dealing with sacred or highly sensitive physical materials, for digital data does not exist independently from its creator. For Soad and her peers, the shared video represented both a symbol of resistance and an opening for more danger. Honduran news agencies claimed that

Soad Nicole Ham Bustillo, 13, at a student protest in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, March 2015. Source: YouTube video by Dick Emanuelsson.

Soad's appearance on social networks had reached thousands of angry Hondurans at home and abroad, costing Soad her life. Others would claim that her appearance paved the way for more vocal and visible opposition to the many struggles Honduran students face. Both interpretations speak to the way Soad's digital footprint brought on more impact on her efforts and thus attracted attention from those not threatened by her gained impact. Through Soad's example, readers can recognize that the creators and those captured in digital data exist beyond the screen, and their safety should be of the utmost concern, especially for those wishing to become an extension of the work being done on the ground.

Bio: Itza A. Carbajal, the daughter of Honduran immigrants, is a native of New Orleans, and a survivor of Hurricane Katrina. She is pursuing a Master of Science in Information Studies with a focus on archival management and digital records at the UT Austin School of Information.

Note: Digital Keepers, was first published in the 2016-2017 issue of Portal, the annual review of LLILAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections at The University of Texas at Austin. The accompanying notes and bibliography that appeared with the article are available to Voz readers upon request from: lavoz@esperanzacenter.org

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